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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 000765

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PREF PREL LI NI

SUBJECT: SUBSTANDARD CONDITIONS PROVOKE PLEAS FROM
REFUGEES AT ORU CAMP

1. Summary: On a visit to Oru Refugee Camp, PRM regional refugee coordinator, PRM admissions program officer, and Lagos pol-off were greeted by a large crowd. The refugees complained of substandard housing and sanitation, both evident on a tour of the camp. They explained the barriers to local integration, including job scarcity and language and cultural differences. UNHCR staff reported the camp is below standards on almost all indicators. UNHCR funding for the camp was never increased to account for the influx of 3,000 Liberian refugees in 2003. Staff do not expect a budget increase in the future because UNHCR plans to close the camp. It likely will take years to repatriate, integrate, or resettle all the refugees at Oru Camp. PRM's regional refugee coordinator characterized the camp's conditions as among the worst in West Africa. End summary.

2. On April 12, the regional refugee coordinator, PRM desk officer, and Lagos pol-off visited the Oru Refugee camp, where 5,300 of the estimated 8,000 refugees in Nigeria live. The camp is run by UNHCR in partnership with the Nigerian National Commission for Refugees. Other partners include the Red Cross, the Nigerian Police Force (NPF), the Ijebu North Local Government, and the Justice, Development and Peace Commission of the local Catholic diocese. About 3,800 of the refugees are Liberian. Another 1,000 are Sierra Leonean. The remainder are from DROC, Sudan, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Burundi, Somalia, and other African countries.

Residents Give Tour of Substandard
Conditions and Plead for Improvements

3. A large crowd of camp residents greeted us at the gates, many bearing homemade signs such as "President Bush, refugees in Nigeria need your help," "We are suffering here," and "I was raped." The crowd swarmed around us during our tour of the camp. They cheered loudly when they diverted us from the path they believed camp managers wanted to follow. The "diversion" took us to a small bakery the residents complained operated as a private enterprise within the camp. The residents also steered us through several rooms in the school building and two warehouses that serve as makeshift living quarters for about 300 of the 3,000 Liberians who arrived in 2003. The warehouses were particularly stifling in the midday heat, with dirt floors and only plastic and canvas sheets to serve as partitions.

4. Conditions in the regular housing area were better than in the school and warehouses, but not much. The refugees residing in these dwellings also bemoaned their situation. Some complained of over crowding and of snake infestation. Everyone pointed out the inadequate latrine and shower facilities; they complained the camp has too few facilities and that those are of poor condition and offer little privacy.

"Resettlement Is Our Only Option"

5. Following the tour, the refugees assembled to speak with us in a central building, filling the large hall to overflowing. Representatives shared the primary concerns of their respective groups. The Liberian representative expressed appreciation for what the camp provides and for the hospitality of the Nigerian government. He appealed, however, for more support for education and human resource development, medical assistance, food assistance, and housing. He noted that the phase-down of food assistance has led some refugees to resort to begging, prostitution, and odd jobs. He likened the situation of those living in the school building to "people locked in prisons, living in hopelessness and despair."

6. As barriers to local integration, the representative cited language, high unemployment in the surrounding areas, and social intolerance. (Note:

Although English is Nigeria's official language, different ethnic languages remain the primary language in many areas away from primary urban centers.) In regard to repatriation, he maintained the Liberian government is unprepared to protect and provide for returning refugees. He concluded that resettlement to a third country is the only durable option for most of the Liberian refugees, noting the resettlement rate from Oru is below that from other camps in the region. The representatives of other nationalities raised similar concerns about conditions in the camp and made similar arguments for resettlement as the best or only option. The regional refugee coordinator thanked the representatives for their presentations, but he cautioned the refugees that only 1-2% of the worldwide total of refugees are resettled annually.

Minimal Services, Many Below Standard

17. In a separate meeting at the UNHCR office in Lagos, UNHCR staff outlined the services the agency and its partners provide refugees at the camp, including medical assistance, food assistance for vulnerable persons, primary education, and some secondary education and vocational training. The staff is well aware that camp conditions fall below UNHCR standards for almost all indicators: 68 people per latrine, against a standard of 20 per latrine; 66 people per communal shower, against a standard of 50 per shower; individual latrines in 28% of dwellings, against a standard of 100%; and adequate water and sanitation in 72% of communal buildings, against a standard of 100%.

Unchanged Budget As Camp Moves Toward Exit Strategy

18. Staff reported the budget for the camp has not changed since the influx of Liberians in 2003. The budget for infrastructure allows some improvements but is too small to build housing for those now residing in the school and warehouses. The staff explained UNHCR is unlikely to increase the camp's budget, since donors want the camp moved to an exit strategy. UNHCR staff told us they plan this year to keep the Liberians informed of the situation in Liberia to help them decide whether to return after the elections in October. Hoping the elections go well, UNHCR staff plans to repatriate 1,000 Liberian refugees towards the end of 2005 and another 2,000 in 2006. Regarding the Sierra Leonean refugees, UNHCR plans to improve assistance for local integration. The staff, however, acknowledged the difficulty of local integration, despite the GON's open policy for ECOWAS citizens. The UNHCR protection officer commented that with 70 percent of its own citizens living in poverty, Nigeria has "no space for refugees." She also noted that because Nigeria has "only" 8,000 refugees, UNHCR headquarters sees it as an easy place to make cuts when cuts need to be made.

19. Comment: Even under the best scenario, it likely will take several years to repatriate, integrate, or resettle the refugees at Oru Camp. UNHCR's timetable for repatriation seems overly optimistic. Although we want to encourage repatriation, we doubt the refugees at Oru will cooperate to the extent that UNHCR will be able to meet its late 2005/2006 repatriation targets. In the meantime, the camp residents live in some of the worst conditions of any refugees in West Africa. Ironically, with the meager housing and services the camp does provide, the refugees live in better conditions than many poor Nigerians. The refugees and the UNHCR staff have accurately assessed the situation: although Nigeria has been a gracious host accepting these refugees and in providing for them, the camp's 5,300 residents are understandably overlooked as Nigeria struggles with nationwide problems of poverty, job scarcity, and poor sanitation. International donors remain the only realistic hope for improving conditions at Oru Camp. End comment.

110. This cable was cleared by the PRM regional refugee coordinator and PRM admissions program officer.

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